

Protecting Quality of Life in New Jersey

Lisa P. Jackson, Commissioner

New Jersey is a diverse state blessed with beautiful acres of open space, farmland and historic properties. We are also a state with a long history of support for preservation of these resources. Since 1961, voters have steadfastly favored funding for open space preservation. Such support has allowed New Jersey to develop one of the country's most successful land preservation programs. The partnerships we have developed with local representatives to preserve open space are a key ingredient of our success. Currently, every county and more than 230 municipalities raise local funds to leverage state funding for land preservation.

We all recognize that as the most densely populated state in the nation, preserving open space is critical to our quality of life. But open space preservation supports a number of critical goals. It helps protect threatened and endangered species by protecting critical habitats, protects our water resources by buffering rivers, lakes and streams and protecting critical recharge areas and encourages smart growth by improving the quality of life in our urban and developed suburban areas. Recreational open space and parks offer community meeting places, recreational opportunities and spots to enjoy the tranquility of the outdoors. A number of studies indicate that proximity to parks and open space also increases property values.

To date, New Jersey has permanently preserved over 1.3 million acres, but over 2 million acres, much of it with high natural resource value, remains unprotected and at risk. This November, the public has a chance to protect lands that are at risk. If the electorate approves the public question on this November's ballot, voters will authorize the issuance of \$200 million in bonds that will be used for open space preservation, buy-outs of properties in flood-prone areas, preservation of historic sites and farmland preservation.

If approved by voters, the \$200 million will be allocated as follows: \$109 million for the acquisition and development of land for public recreation and conservation; (\$45 million to the State; \$55 million to local governments; and \$9 million for 50 percent grants to qualifying tax exempt non-profit organizations); \$73 million for farmland preservation; \$12 million to revive the "Blue Acres" program, allowing the State to purchase properties that are prone to flood damage; and \$6 million for historic preservation.

As the "Crossroads of the Revolution," New Jersey has a rich heritage of history that deserves to be preserved. Numerous historic sites are located throughout the state, which include battlefields, historic residences, lighthouses and relics of century old villages. These fascinating and significant historic resources span the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries and reflect our state's diverse past. Passage of this bond act will ensure present and future generations have the opportunity to experience, understand and enjoy the landmarks of New Jersey's role in the birth and development of our great nation. Preserving our past enhances our future since many historical properties are located in urban areas where historical preservation will advance urban revitalization efforts already underway at the state and local level. Preserving New Jersey's historical sites for future generations goes hand-in-hand with ensuring that those future generations have access to open space for recreation and conservation purposes.

This bond act, if passed, will also allow us to protect New Jersey's communities by reviving our Blue Acres program to mitigate flooding impacts. Flooding has been a chronic problem for too many of our state's residents. Last year's Task Force report on recent Delaware River flooding pointed out the need for funds to purchase flood plain properties. Flooding of New Jersey's waterways has caused loss of life as well as substantial property damage, much of it repetitive loss. Among states, New Jersey has the fourth largest number of repetitive loss properties and has the fourth highest amount of National Flood Insurance Program payouts in the country. This level of repetitive loss in New Jersey keeps premiums high and often unaffordable for policy holders. Acquiring low-lying, flood-prone properties through the Blue Acres program is crucial to assuring public health, safety and welfare of New Jersey residents. Acquisition of these flood-prone areas preserves these lands for recreation and conservation purposes by restoring, enhancing and protecting the water quality and ecosystems of our rivers.

This bond issue, if approved, will also help us respond to the threat of climate change. We are likely to see additional areas subject to flooding and even more devastating floods due to climate change, a fact that was highlighted in a recent report by the Union of Concerned Scientists that considered the impacts of climate change on the Garden State. As temperatures rise and flooding increases, preserving flood plains as open space will avert the worst of the property damage and personal traumas that flooding inflicts. Funding to protect New Jersey's farm will continue to allow residents to buy "Jersey Fresh" fruits and vegetables and avoids the greenhouse gas emissions otherwise required to transport such foods from out of state.

Preservation and conservation of open spaces, historical sites, farmland and the acquisition of flood-prone areas will improve the quality of life for millions of New Jersey residents. The success of the Green Acres program can be seen across the state. We must build upon that record of success to ensure not only the quality of our environment, but also the quality of our lives.

As mayors you recognize firsthand what open spaces and historic sites mean to our communities. I need your help to educate your constituents on the value of preserving these important areas and what they provide to state residents. As their representatives and leaders, you can and must remind them that when we invest in our open spaces and our heritage, we are investing in New Jersey's future.